Ethics and extermination

Reflections on Nazi genocide

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Introduction

The nine essays assembled here for the first time are a representative selection of a larger corpus of work on National Socialist Germany produced over the last twelve years. Broadly speaking, these essays cover three interests: the German 'east', so-called 'euthanasia' and Nazi racial exterminism, with the activities of professionals forming one bridge between all three, the other being an interest in the history of morality within this period.

My earliest work was on medieval history, albeit late medieval Prussia.[1] Study of the medieval past necessarily entailed wider reading in the historiography of the subject over the last 200 years, reading which suggested the extent to which the history of the Middle Ages had been instrumentalised and manipulated for contemporary political uses. This was obviously not unique to either this subject or German historical writing in general. History has probably been used by politicians since the activity was first thought worthwhile, and continues in more or less subtle ways in the present. The opening chapter below, slightly altered to locate the Stasi state known as the German Democratic Republic in the past, follows the complex shifts in how over two centuries historians and others conceived of the history of an international military religious order, whose historical reality was usually strikingly at variance with what they made of it. Although the subject was a far frontier of western Christendom, it is gratifying to see that the article is still regarded as serviceable by writers concerned with the protean contemporary scene on the borderlands between eastern and western Europe.[2]

The approach in chapter 1 was still based on the history of ideas, liberally interpreted, an approach whose limitations were being highlighted in the early 1980s by such scholars as Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn. In subsequent work I began to investigate the manifold relations between historians and government, loosely defined, during the Weimar and Nazi periods. Working in German and Polish archives on historians and other so-called experts who studied the ethnic German presence in eastern Europe and Russia (*Ostforschung*), it became apparent that they had not simply produced propagandised versions of the past to legitimise current policy, but that alongside other professionals, had enthusiastically volunteered their expertise in the service of ethnic cleansing and racial annihilation.[3] Although these scholars included the usual quota of cranks, it was striking to see the similar commitment of major scholarly figures, including some such as Albert Brackmann, Werner Conze, Walter Kuhn or Theodor Schieder, who had become pillars of the post-war West German historical establishment. Not surprisingly, West German scholars, who were taught by, and advanced by these men, had not poked around very thoroughly in these closets, while East German historiography resembled a form of purposive character assassination, systematically overrating their importance. One of the most professionally powerful of these scholars was the medievalist Albert Brackmann, of whom the second chapter is a biographical portrait. His case illustrates how, given the 'right' political conditions of a totalitarian regime, a sort of unreflective professional amorality can be translated into the capacity to do other people serious harm. The chapter could be read as a description of an activist academic 'type', one moreover whose enveloping political rhetoric could nowadays just as easily be ethnic, feminist or socialist. There are morals in this for everyone.

Just as one wearies of newspapers consisting of endless articles about other journalists, so historiography has finite charms, tending as it does to professional narcissism or solipsism. Beyond these professionals was the larger complex of German relations with eastern Europe and Russia, where in the third and longest chapter below, the *Ostforscher* effectively dissolve into a footnote amidst the titanic struggle of the 1941–5 Russo-German war, although this designation begs several questions. Although generally agreeing with the Irish historian Roy Foster that military history is the academic equivalent of train-spotting, a view borne out if one surveys the weedy clientele who frequent specialist

bookshops, the chapter begins with a broad outline of the military drama, before exploring the subjects of morale, occupation policies and the dilemmas and double disenchantment of many Soviet nationalities. This chapter grew out of a fascinating, if more limited, assignment from Niall Ferguson, namely to reflect on what might have happened had Hitler been victorious on the Eastern Front, a challenge which has triggered a fresh interest in Russian history, and a renewed appreciation of how things can be aleatory even within subjects with such a powerful in-built teleology as Nazi Germany. My approach was also strongly influenced by a powerful critique by Professor Norman Davies of Gerhard Weinberg's 'global' history of the Second World War, a global history which contrived to leave out the fate of eastern Europe and non-Russian Soviet nationalities, for whose peoples 1945 did not bring liberation.[4] In post-totalitarian Europe, we are all obliged to understand at least something of the complex histories of the Chechens, Cossacks, Ingush, Tatars, Ukrainians or Volga Germans rather than still construing the conflict through the eyes of the defunct imperial power.

Part II is devoted to the so-called 'euthanasia' programme. Having originally conceived of this in terms of a study of medical criminality, the project that became the book *Death and Deliverance: Euthanasia in Germany 1900–1945* developed into a much broader undertaking.[5] This was partly because it became apparent that this malign enterprise grew out of developments during the liberal Weimar Republic. This applied to both the intellectual rationalisations, notably the debate stimulated by the 1920 tract of Binding and Hoche, but also to the negative consequences of 'progressive' psychiatric reforms, namely the creation of a potentially eradicable chronic sub-class within the already marginalised psychiatric population.

But this was also no mere history of psychiatric institutions or a sub-Foucauldian critique of psychiatry, rationality and reform. Just as historians such as Robert Gellately were emphasising the societal sea of denunciation without which the Gestapo could not effectively swim, so a study of popular opinion towards the mentally and physcially handicapped revealed that some families or individuals were not ill disposed towards the state killing their sick relatives by proxy.[6] If this was the case, then it is not surprising that the Nazis could persecute unpopular minorities such as foreign forced workers, homosexuals, Jews or Sinti and Roma with relative impunity. The main findings of this research are reflected in chapter 4 below. It attempts to bring together the history

of ideas, ethical attitudes and behaviour, health economics, the history of psychiatry, as well as the more familiar themes of Nazi eugenics and racial science.

The 'euthanasia' programme affected the religious in the sense that while Christians of both major denominations subscribe to the doctrine of the sanctity of human life, many of the victims of the 'euthanasia' programme came from ecclesiastically controlled institutions. Chapter 5 examines the extent to which responsible churchmen embraced essentially secular scientific ideologies (for a preoccupation with the worldly was not simply a product of the quasi-Marxist theologies of the 1960s), meeting the Nazis half-way on this slippery ground even as they, accurately enough, denounced Nazism as a form of latterday paganism, replete with its own ersatz sub-Nietzschean morality. Although due scope is given to the undeniable pressures which a totalitarian government of this kind could bring to bear upon individual religious communities – included threats to alter charitable tax status, expropriation or charges of sexual impropriety – the fact remains that with a few exceptions they generally endeavoured to refine Nazi policies rather than confront them. In the upper reaches of both hierarchies, bishops and cardinals used the time-honoured methods of all establishments to bring informal influence to bear on a government consisting mostly of gangsters or cowed conservatives. Below this level, individual asylum staff were confronted by horrible dilemmas, which I have tried to convey fairly and, I hope, sympathetically. In so far as anyone should be condemned for their actions, we should confine this to the purposive minority who actively brought about these policies rather than those who had to negotiate their grim consequences. Opposing Nazi policy was not akin to exposing some abuse in the National Health Service.

Having written about euthanasia as an historical problem, I have had the disconcerting experience of spectating as representatives of the US Hemlock Society (*sic*) and pro-life lobbyists battled it out without any reference to what I had just been talking about. Such lessons in the power of obsessions, and one's own irrelevance, are salutary. Chapter 6 below is an attempt to show why I think the Nazi analogy is pretty marginal to contemporary discussions about euthanasia – an issue where my personal sympathies are in favour of cautious liberalisation. Given that all contemporary advocates of euthanasia are ultimately motivated by respect for individual autonomy and compassion for

suffering individuals, I fail to see what a regime which murdered the mentally and physically handicapped for reasons of racial purity and cost has to do with it. The issue of euthanasia is separable from attempts to engineer biological utopias, where the example of contemporary communist China is in any case as serviceable as Nazism. Opponents of euthanasia will have to come up with something rather better than the analogy with what happened in Germany fifty years ago. In this respect at least, the shadow cast by Nazism is shortening.

The concluding part of the book is concerned with the Holocaust. Chapter 7 reflects and develops themes I first explored together with the German historian Wolfgang Wippermann in our monograph *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945.*[7] It differs from the book in the sense of giving greater prominence to international developments in eugenics, especially in the United States of America, and in the stress upon societal factors which gave added impetus to Nazi policies, and without which the organs of the state would not have been able to function so efficiently. Explicitly critical of the distortions introduced to this subject by various kinds of Marxism, the book tried to study the subject in the terms that evidently mattered to the Nazis, revealing the energy and implacability they brought to realising their overall vision.

The final chapters are essentially concerned with how one writes about the Holocaust. Chapter 8 deals with a fad enjoying current popularity in some German historical circles, namely the idea that the 'Final Solution' represented an attempt to implement rationally conceived objectives, i.e. the rationalisation of the backward, overpopulated economies of occupied eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This is an extreme variant of modernisation theories, theories which seem to appeal to a cross-section of younger, mainly German, historians whose personal politics and political agendas are often diametrically opposite. Attempts to ascribe modernity to this or that aspect of Nazi policy run up against sources which speak of relapses into medieval barbarism, on the part of a movement which self-consciously strove to revive the primitive. Solipsistic in effect, the essay is not entirely cynical, since some of the trends it attacks – such as an ill-informed indictment of 'science' – are worryingly influential, at least in parts of western academia.

If this critique is trenchantly expressed, the final chapter is a paradoxical celebration of the rich varieties of recent writing on the Holocaust, an almost random cross-section of where we are now. It discusses not

only some very fine examples of recent historical scholarship, particularly by Austrian and Israeli historians, but also survivor testimonies; works devoted to the responses of bystanders, including the Western Allies; an autobiography by the distinguished historian Raul Hilberg; and an outstanding example of literary criticism; as well as incorporating some oblique comments on cinematic representations of the subject, such as Lanzmann's *Shoah* or Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. The 'Historikerstreit' (historians' debate) of the 1980s conveyed the misleading impression that all the facts were known, leaving just the matter of interpretation and broader historical context. Given the recent appearance of important research monographs by younger historians such as Dieter Pöhl or Hans Safrian, this view seems with hindsight highly premature.

The essay from which chapter 9 developed was written amidst the celebrations to mark the end of the Second World War in the European theatre of operations, a context that illustrated the curious, super-nova like capacity of this subject to gain energy as the events themselves recede in time, a phenomenon for which I have seen no satisfactory explanation, and which is in such marked contrast to relative western (and apparently Russian) indifference to other recent examples of mass murder, notably in the former Soviet Union.[8] This obsession is potentially unhealthy, not simply in terms of the sourness it injects into contemporary relations with Germany, an ally, trading partner and exemplary liberal democracy more than ready to flagellate itself with its own history, but more generally in the sense that the world has moved on to a new set of problems, to which this episode evidently does not afford useful guidance, and where perhaps there are more apposite contemporary analogies.[9]